

Peter Waterman (1936–2017): Labor Historian and Activist

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It is very fitting that the *International Labor and Working Class History* journal marks the passing of Peter Waterman given his long and remarkable record as global labor thinker and activist.

Peter Waterman was born into a middle-class Jewish family in London and was a member of the Young Communists. This activism led him to become the English language editor of the monthly journal of the International Union of Students in Prague during the second half of the 1950s. In the early 1960s, he studied politics, philosophy, and economics at Oxford University via Ruskin College. He returned to Prague to work for the World Federation of Trade Unions information department but left after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He then did a Masters in West African studies at Birmingham University and began working at Ahmadu Bello in northern Nigeria in the early 1970s. He became interested in African labor studies through contacts made at WFTU's Africa desk. From 1972 to his retirement in 1998, he taught at the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague from where he published the Newsletter of International Labour Studies in the 1980s, and launched his "real" career as a global labor scholar and activist.

The "early" Peter Waterman was part of a wave of British academics doing their PhDs in West Africa. Peter did his on the dockworkers in Lagos at a time when the "labor aristocracy" debates were raging. Were these organized workers playing a conservative and self-interested role or might they play a leading and radical role organizing the mass of workers? While his PhD never attained wide circulation, an article in *Development and Change* (6 (3): 1975) on "The 'labour aristocracy' in Africa" nicely sums up the debate and Peter's own engagement with it. There is continuity between this work and the phase which began in the late 1970s (when I got to know Peter) when the "new international labor studies" was launched. A continuous strand of research and engagement with organized labor's relationship with community groups occurred, for example, with the emergence of the independent trade union moment in South Africa as the struggle against apartheid intensified. This problematic relationship—which generated much debate internationally—is well captured by one of Peter's rare articles for the academic world: "Social-Movement Unionism: A New Union Model for a New World Order" (*Review*, 16 (3): 1993). It is a debate that has rumbled on to this day.

The "mature" Peter Waterman became known for his critical stance with regards to the international trade union leadership and his tireless promotion

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of the new labor internationalism. This phase is best illustrated by Peter's own book *Globalization, Social Movements and the New Internationalism* (Mansell, 1998), which focused on the history and prospects for labor internationalism. At this stage, he was much influenced by Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells with their work of globalization and the rise of the network society. It also saw a radical-democratic language and perspective replacing his earlier Marxist-socialist paradigm. Two co-edited collections also marked this phase of Peter's collaborative work: *Labour Worldwide in the Era of Globalization* (Macmillan, 1999) and *Place, Space and the New Labour Internationalisms* (Blackwell, 2001). They also mark a shift from a focus on trade unions and organized labor (the first volume) to a more explicit or total commitment (in the second volume) to the construction of a new internationalism based squarely on the radical-democratic or "new" social movements.

There is also a "late" or a radical Peter Waterman who became part of the global justice movement after 2000. This tied in with his earlier pioneering work on labor communications online of which he was an early adopter. The "Fifth International" was going to be based on international labor communications by computer. Peter was always looking to the "new" social movements to inspire a new emancipatory strategy for labor. He collaborated with others to promote, analyze, and critique the World Social Forum in the 2000s. The plural, decentralized, and reflexive nature of the alter-globalization movements suited Peter's personality and modus operandi. He could not be further away from the Soviet tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia in 1968 while working for the stifling and bureaucratic World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU).

After 2000, Peter engaged mainly with the emerging "global justice and solidarity movement," enthusiastically but also critically. The aims and objectives emerging in the alter-globalization movement squared very much with his own ideas springing from the critique of traditional forms of mobilization. He attended many of the World Social Forum events, particularly the ones held in Latin America. Peter became quite critical of this body especially after Hugo Chávez turned up in Porto Alegre in 2005. What was a military *caudillo* doing at an event of the new new left? This was the old politics creeping back in, he thought. More broadly, the WSF was, for him, "lacking in openness, transparency and accountability," a politics he was very familiar with, of course. He saw it reproducing the politics of party and the big international NGOs (BINGO) that were key to the formation of the WSF. Peter began to fear that this new broad movement that he thought was a novel emancipatory space, a movement of movements, might end up promoting a "decent globalization" reminiscent of the "decent work" campaign promoted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and international trade unions in the 1990s, of which he had been fiercely critical. What Peter argued for, along with some of the younger and peripheral members of this milieu, was to constantly "keep moving" as the best way to beat Michel's "Iron Law of Oligarchy" that sees movements peaking and then institutionalized.

Peter's personal politics would be hard to pin down. Clearly an internationalist he would have had a natural cosmopolitan approach to the world. His commitment to labor was tempered by his almost visceral dislike of the trade union leadership/bureaucracy. Peter's commitment to those outside formal employment, especially in the global South, was a constant. As was his commitment to feminism, which emerged in his middle period, to call it that. Peter was not a party political animal (understandable with someone from a CP background) but he took like a duck to water to online communication as it emerged in the 1990s. There was also his marked hostility towards what he called populism and Third Worldism, but which I boiled down to nationalism. Whenever we met in South Africa, Latin America, or my home base in Ireland, Peter could simply not understand (or even engage with) my usually innately radical nationalist friends and colleagues. This, of course, was part and parcel of his "Dutch" cosmopolitanism.

Peter Waterman was often stridently critical of others but no one ever doubted his commitment to the cause of labor and there are many younger scholars across the world who benefitted from his personal generosity and interest. His work will be made accessible on a dedicated website which will continue to inspire even his critics.